



Girls & Sport - Part I

Girl Connection

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES
IOWA GENDER-SPECIFIC SERVICES TASK FORCE
APRIL 2004

"I don't sit on the sidelines
and watch others have fun."

Lana, 38

1. How do you feel your involvement in or absence of involvement in sports/physical activity impacted your self-concept as a teenager/young adult?
2. What is the lasting impact, if any, in your life today?

These were the questions a diverse group of women from age 23 to age 71 and from all walks of life answered for this newsletter. Two themes came through in nearly all of their responses as a powerful and positive part of their sports experience: the team atmosphere and relationships as well as feeling a level of physical confidence and strength.

"It was a way to be with girls that had a similar interest and it helped me develop lasting friendships with team mates and other girls that I have competed against." Jenna, 24

"I also found a positive impact from the socialization—being part of the team. I felt connected with others in school." Andrea, 30

"I always had a place where I felt accepted and did not feel I had to do drastic things to get attention from my peers." Liz, 29

"It helped me have more comfort with my body – what it could do." Ladonna, 44

"I like to feel healthy and that my body is strong. I think having that mentality throughout adolescence prompted me to continue that through adulthood." Lily, 28

"I was strong and capable and skilled – it all made me feel good about myself." Holly, 32

A major finding of the President's Council on Physical Fitness in 1997: "Exercise and sport participation can enhance mental health by offering adolescent girls positive feelings about body image, improved self-esteem, tangible experiences of competency and success and increased self-confidence."¹ An increasing body of research shows how involvement in athletics and other forms of physical activity act as protective factors against teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, smoking, delinquency, depression, anxiety and more. Aside from mental health and social benefits, exercise can mitigate increasing obesity in young people.

In 1971, one in 27 girls participated in HS athletics. In 1994, that ratio changed to one in three. This dramatic increase was in no small part due to Title IX, the 1972 federal law that bars gender discrimination in education, whether it be academics or athletics. However, there are still challenges to athletic participation by girls. The "professionalization" of children's sports (through clubs) has increased the expense of participation, at the same time limiting accessibility.² Gender role stereotypes have led to reticence on the part of some parents to support their athletic daughters and despite Title IX, boys still have a disproportionate numbers of opportunities.

At the same time, girls are bulldozing through these barriers by coming out in record numbers to get involved in sports. Unfortunately, there are still those who believe that sports and girls just don't go together. It's too "unladylike" and girls' femininity is called into question. Even girls' anatomy has been seen as too frail for the rigors of competition. As recently as the 1970s, in a case attempting to open up little league baseball to girls, the judge heard arguments from a medical witness claiming there was a danger of breast cancer developing in female players who were slammed on the chest by a hardball - a claim later proved baseless.²

Sport is not the answer to all the problems that face at risk and delinquent girls, but when put to suitable use, it can be an invaluable tool in that pursuit.

In Part II, we will examine further research including cultural differences (racial, socioeconomic and disability) and things to consider when getting girls involved in sports.

Other Observations

"I still think like an athlete." Patty, 52

"I learned to manage my time wisely. It gave me good self-esteem. I was discouraged at times but then I was determined to do better and I was confident - not afraid of or intimidated by other people." Alicia, 25

"I remember being excited that my mother took time off work to come watch me swim." Edith, 51

"It taught me how to win and lose gracefully... It was an experience that was integral in forming who I am today. I consider myself as an equal to men and other women." Emily, 26

"Seeds of learning valuable life lessons were planted in my adolescent years, such as the value of dedication, hard work, respect of differences in others, and understanding defeat in a positive light" Tessa, 46

"I was VERY competitive and this gave me an outlet for that competitiveness." Katie, 33

**All names have been changed.*

Endnotes

1 President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport. (1997). Physical activity & sport in the lives of girls: Physical & mental health dimensions from an interdisciplinary approach. Washington D.C.

2 Zimmerman, J. & Reavill, G.. (1998). Raising Our Athletic Daughters: How Sports Can Build Self-Esteem and Save Girls' Lives. New York: Doubleday.

The Girl Connection

newsletter is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force.

April 2004 ~ "Girls and Sport-Part I"

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